

AUDIENCE-BUILDING

BY TED OUTERBRIDGE, *Northern Peeks - A Journal for Canadian Magicians, Volume 22, Number 1, Winter 2018*

The Association of Performing Arts Professionals (APAP) holds the world's largest booking conference annually in New York City. Thousands of attendees gather to buy and sell shows ranging from undiscovered emerging artists to U2. It is quite a phenomenon and whenever possible Marion and I rent a booth in one of the exhibit halls. It's an excellent way to make new contacts and stay in touch with existing ones. There are numerous activities going on simultaneously at APAP and one of these is *5 Minutes to Shine* (5MTS), an event that showcases the most innovative engagement and audience-building work from the performing arts field. Much to my surprise, in 2017 I was invited to speak at this event. Here is what I had to say.

September 11, 2001 changed the lives of many people including mine and that of my partner and wife, Marion. My brother had just started working in Lower Manhattan the day before, and we could not reach him until late in the day. This date was a turning point for us on many levels and we questioned why we were performing a traditional magic show. We decided to rewrite our entire show with an emphasis on celebrating life instead of simply fooling people.

By combining original magic with dance and theatre, our illusions now come from our hearts and not a magic store catalogue. Our performances re-enact moments in time that our audiences can relate to. We now work as equal partners, each with our own strengths. A vanish-and-reappearance illusion is now a *Time Machine* symbolizing everyone's desire to change the past. One of the most powerful pieces in our new show is the *Gypsy Thread*, a four-hundred-year-old piece of magic with a simple plot but our own very special words which have elicited very strong reactions from our audiences. We developed a special string that is saturated with ultraviolet-sensitive pigments and can be seen from the back of a 1,000-seat theatre.

How did we convey our excitement about this new show and build an audience for it? One of our first performances was at the Confederation Centre of the Arts in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island in March 2004. It was the largest venue we played that season and it was a very important show for us. It was our first performance in PEI and nobody there had heard our name before. Ticket sales were slow but steady. One week before show night, 500 out of 1100 seats had been sold. Working in partnership with theatre's publicist and marketing department, we developed a Marketing Magic program to bring our magic into the community prior to the show. We used several creative forms of media and outreach to build engagement with the potential local audience, who would ultimately buy tickets and attend the show. First of all, a Time Capsule display was set up in the theatre lobby. "What would you put in a time capsule? The Outerbridges already know."

We arrived several days prior to the performance to present magic workshops at several local elementary and high school drama departments as well as the local magic

club. In the workshop we discuss how we celebrate life with our art instead of simply fooling people. This also generated media coverage.

We developed *Time of Day*, a trick that can be performed on the radio with a random caller and the radio host. We predicted a specific time of day - which we had sent to the radio station the week before. The prediction arrived in an antique-looking envelope sealed with wax. This generated a lot of interest and discussion about what would happen, even before we arrived.

On the big day, we were in the studio with the radio host and a police officer who verified that everything was as it appeared to be. The radio host invited a listener to call in. I got "psychically involved" with the caller. The caller named a time. The radio host tore open the envelope. Inside it was a jute bundle tied with string, and inside that was a card with a time written on it. It matched the time the caller chose!

We showed another aspect of our magic in downtown Charlottetown by performing a levitation illusion in front of the theatre. We had arranged for the local media to be present and the next day we were on the TV news and the front page!

The result was 600 seats sold in one day. A new box office record for the Confederation Centre of the Arts! At the end of our performance we were rewarded with a standing ovation. We had made 1100 new friends. When we returned three years later we wondered what would happen. We sold out again. Our 1100 friends had spread the word for us!

For the past sixteen years we have continued to offer our Marketing Magic program to bring our magic into the communities where we perform. We implement it with the help of the theatre's publicist or our own publicist when necessary. Two Canadian presenting organizations have recognized our community relationship building with awards: BC Touring Council *2010 Touring Artist of the Year* award and Ontario Contact *2011 Award of Excellence*.